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Complete Streets in Big Sky Country

By [Stefanie Seskin](#), on September 12th, 2011 in [Local](#)

Billings, the "Star of the Big Sky Country," has just a bit more to brag about now that it committed to creating streets that are safe for all types of travelers with the unanimous adoption of a [Complete Streets policy](#) on August 22. Billings is the fourth, and largest, community in Montana to adopt a policy.

Driven by the goals of safer streets and a healthier community, residents first set their sights on a Complete Streets policy in 2009. The [Healthy By Design Advisory Committee](#) led the efforts and brought us to town in early 2010 to lead a [Complete Streets Workshop](#) with key advocates and decision-makers. In just a few months, they established a [Complete Streets Ad Hoc Committee](#) representing diverse interests to develop policy language and talk to various community groups about the Complete Streets concept.

In April 2011, they unveiled a draft resolution at a public forum and solicited comments from the general public, ensuring that the vision and reasoning for a Complete Streets policy reflected the community's values.

Despite the immense effort to build support for Complete Streets, the policy's adoption was not guaranteed. In June, the Billings Area Bikeway and Trail Master Plan [failed to garner approval](#) from Yellowstone County and the State of Montana Department of Transportation because of its Complete Streets language. That plan was approved on August 8 – but stripped of all Complete Streets language.

Supporters of the local policy organized. The *Billings Gazette* ran not one but two editorials in favor of the policy, pointing out that it was "[a locally generated proposal](#) for a guiding policy that would be consistent with what the council has set as goals." Furthermore, they argued, "the idea of making streets more accessible to walkers, bikers, wheelchairs, bus riders and everyone else isn't about service to 'special interests.' [Complete streets is about being inclusive](#) – recognizing that quality of life requires more than four-lane arterials and chip sealed avenues."

Council members were, understandably, concerned and bewildered with the county and state's interpretation of Complete Streets as "inflexible" with "predetermined design goals." Indeed, Billings's policy lays out flexible, context-sensitive guidelines to ensure the needs of those traveling on foot, bicycle, or bus are reflected in appropriate transportation projects. The adopted policy should result in additional adaptability and a wider array of potential design solutions.

The day before Council's final vote, former Mayor Ron Tussing [organized a bike ride and rally](#) in favor of the policy, [attracting nearly 70 residents](#).

Tussing went a step further than simply organizing the rally. He called on Governor Brian Schweitzer's office to clarify the state's stance on Complete Streets policies at the city-level. So long as the policy was flexibility in implementation, the [Governor's office responded](#), there was no state-level opposition.

In addition to the rally, Complete Streets supporters called and emailed their council members in droves. During the public hearing prior to the vote, 15 stood up in favor of the policy and just 2 spoke against it.

In the end, Council agreed with the *Gazette's take*: "Complete streets is an inclusive policy that makes sense for our growing city of 100,000."

Healthy by Design Advisory Committee

- Better Billings Foundation
- Big Sky EDA
- Big Sky State Games
- Billings Clinic
- Billings Family YMCA
- Cancer Control Coalition

"If we think we don't have the time and money to do it right, what makes you think we have the time and money to do it over?"

– Dr. Mark Nicholson

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